

By BERNARD WEINRAUB

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HOLLYWOOD, Jan. 1 — The movie world opened the new year in a giddy but nervous mood.

After a tepid economic year in Hollywood, such films as "Hook," "Beauty and the Beast" and "Father of the Bride" did strong business over the holidays in a time of recession. And many movie executives, vacationing in such places as Aspen, Colo.; Sun Valley, Idaho, and Maui, Hawaii, read their daily faxes of box office returns and proclaimed business better than ever.

But other film makers were less sanguine. "I don't see many blessings here," said Lili Fini Zanuck, director of the new film "Rush," about two undercover narcotics agents who turn into lawbreakers, and best known for producing the movie "Driving Miss Daisy" with her husband, Richard D. Zanuck.

Ms. Zanuck, speaking from her home in Sun Valley, said: "The real family-oriented pictures are doing incredible business, but the adult films, "Bugsy" and "J. F. K.," are not doing that kind of business. So there'll be pressure now on those of us who make adult films to come up with these same kinds of family movies. Including animated movies. Frankly, it's very difficult to make certain kinds of adult movies now, movies that were successful in the past, movies like 'Midnight Cowboy,' 'Serpico.'"

Even a traditionally optimistic executive like Mark Canton, head of Columbia Pictures, expressed some uncertainty about the box office over the holidays, one of the year's busiest times for moviegoing. "We're ending the year on an upbeat note," he said in an interview from Maui. "But I think the big news of last year is that the realities of the recession have begun to sink in and are still sinking in."

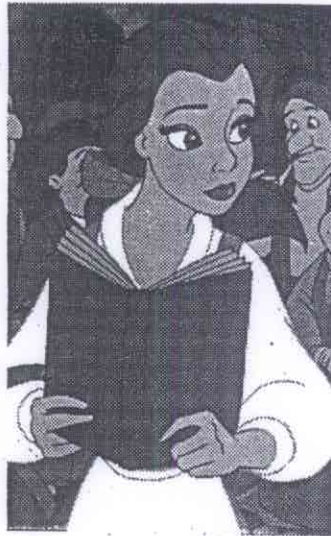
Finding Reasons

The relatively poor year at the box office, he said, resulted from many factors, including the nation's weak economy, news events, including the Persian Gulf war, the collapse of the Soviet system and the Clarence Thomas hearings, all of which tended to keep people at home watching television, as well as the impoverished state of movies. "Maybe there just weren't enough good movies to attract people," Mr. Canton said. His comment was echoed by other executives.

It is still too early to predict the financial success or failure of any of the films that opened over the last two weeks. The producers of some smaller films took major risks in opening their movies amid powerful competition, risks that were made in order to qualify the movies for this

year's Academy Awards. These smaller films include "Rush"; "Fried Green Tomatoes," a comedy-drama about a group of Southern women with Kathy Bates and Jessica Tandy; "The Inner Circle," partly based on a true story about Stalin's loyal film projectionist, portrayed by Tom Hulce; Lawrence Kasdan's drama "Grand Canyon," about race relations, midlife crisis and the randomness of life in Los Angeles, and David Cronenberg's "Naked Lunch," based on the novel about drugs, creativity and hallucination by William S. Burroughs.

It is, however, the expensive and lavishly publicized movies that have drawn the most attention and uncertainty. The Steven Spielberg extravaganza about Peter Pan, "Hook,"



Walt Disney Company

After a tepid economic year, "Beauty and the Beast" was among the money makers released over the holidays.

which opened to mixed reviews, held the No. 1 position for the third week and has been performing with resilience at the box office. To executives at Sony Pictures, the parent company of Tri-Star, which produced "Hook," the box office results have been welcome, especially after the expensive movie proved disappointing at the box office when it opened.

"Look, this business depends on people picking themselves up out of their couch, putting fuel in their tanks, loading up the vehicle, parking and putting themselves in seats with 600 other people to share a communal experience," said Peter Guber, chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment, speaking from his home in Aspen. "Movies basically have an allure that staying at home with a frozen chicken

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Hollywood Delighted At Holiday Success. But Relaxed? No.

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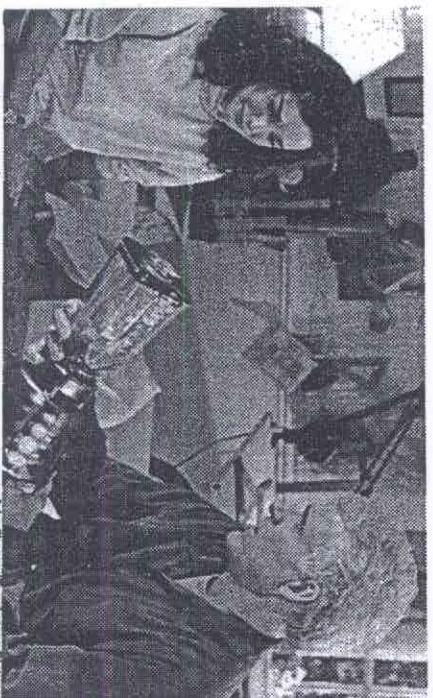
dinner and a video can't achieve. While entertainment isn't a panacea for problems, it certainly has a palliative effect. And this holiday season shows that."

A bleaker view was expressed by Marshall Brickman, a well-known screenwriter whose most recent credit was "For the Boys." Mr. Brickman, still upset about the failure of this holiday movie, said with a laugh that he was planning to write a prequel to it starring Macaulay Culkin and Anna Chlumsky and to call it "For the Gays."

"Why are people going to the movies?" he said. "It's probably the pre-crash panic. The kids are home. It's the holidays. I don't know many families who like to sit at home and discuss philosophy and art with their children. And if they can afford it, most American parents would prefer to take kids to a hypnotic experience based on the regurgitation of television."

Over the weekend, "Hook" took in \$15.2 million, and its total gross earnings as of Tuesday were a formidable \$65 million, Sony executives say. But whether the film will earn enough to repay the studio is another matter. Although the movie cost \$60 million to \$80 million, large percentages of the grosses go to Mr. Spielberg as well as to the three stars, Robin Williams, Dustin Hoffman and Julia Roberts.

The Biggest Success
Perhaps the biggest success of the holiday season is the Walt Disney Company's musical animated film "Beauty and the Beast," which has



Jan Stanton/Iconostance Pictures

Kimberly Williams and Steve Martin in "Father of the Bride," which was among the films that did strong business over the holidays.

grossed about \$69 million as of Tuesday, film industry executives say. Because of holiday vacations, the movie had a striking leap in business last week, 119 percent over the previous week. Another Disney film, the remake of the M-G-M classic "Father of the Bride," placed third, earning \$10.5 million over weekend and bringing its gross after less than two weeks to about \$29.5 million. This is a surprisingly strong showing for the frothy comedy, which stars Steve Martin and Diane Keaton, because it got uneven if respectable reviews.

"You have a movie here where people walk out and feel everything's all right with the world, at least for

the moment," said Howard Rosenman, co-president of Sandollar Pictures and one of the producers of "Father of the Bride." He added: "The economy isn't good, the world is changing, there's AIDS, the homeless, terrible problems — and you give the audience something reassuring and funny about a neurotic but not dysfunctional family. It'll work."

Others films that seem to be performing strongly are Barbra Streisand's "Prince of Tides," about a Southern teacher (Nick Nolte) who goes to New York to help his sister after she tries to kill herself, which came in No. 4 at the box office; "The Last Boy Scout," a Bruce Willis

shoot-'em-up, which was No. 5, and "Star Trek VI," which came in seventh, after Oliver Stone's "J. F. K.," said Exhibitor Relations Inc., which monitors film releases for theater chains.

Some Disappointment

What has surprised some film executives is that the extraordinarily publicized and controversial "J. F. K.," a revisionist version of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, is so far not doing quite the blockbuster business that the studio, Warner Brothers, expected. Industry executives said the movie had grossed about \$21 million.

And the same mild if early disappointment is true to a degree for Barry Levinson's "Bugsy," starring Warren Beatty as the offbeat gangster who dreamed of turning Las Vegas into a mecca of gambling and entertainment. "Bugsy" has received some of the best newspaper and magazine reviews of the year, has already picked up several awards and is a probable prime contender for several major Academy Awards. Executives expect the film to start pulling in business over the next few weeks, especially after positive word-of-mouth reaction from audiences. "Bugsy" had grossed about \$17.5 million as of Tuesday.

Mr. Guber said, "You can't attack every picture like 'Hook.' 'Bugsy' is a mature-audience film. It requires strong critical acclaim. This is a real film, not a movie. It requires audiences to become aware of its value and importance. That's what's happening."

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